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Nobel Prize winning Presidents

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Nobel Prize winning Presidents

How many presidents have won the Nobel Prize?

Revised October 9, 2009.

The Nobel Prize has been given in most years since 1901 in the fields of physics, chemistry, medicine, and literature, as well as for promoting peace. Four U.S. presidents and one vice president have won the Peace Prize in particular.



Theodore Roosevelt was the first U.S. president to win the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize. He received the honor in 1906 for his efforts in mediating the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), midwifing the Treaty of Portsmouth signed by Russia and Japan on September 5, 1905, at Portsmouth, NH. TR did not attend the award ceremony but dispatched Herbert H. D. Peirce to accept the prize on his behalf. Deputizing Peirce was fitting: in 1905 Peirce, as a member of the U.S. State Department, was in charge of organizing the deliberations at Portsmouth.^[1]

Woodrow Wilson won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919 "in recognition of his Fourteen Points peace program and his work in achieving inclusion of the Covenant of the League of Nations in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles." Wilson was too sick to attend the award ceremony in person. Albert G. Schmedeman, United States ambassador to Norway, accepted the prize on Wilson's behalf.^[2]

Vice President Charles Dawes won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1925, along with Sir Austen Chamberlain. Dawes was a member of Warren Harding's administration as well as Calvin Coolidge's. He became a Nobel laureate in recognition of his work as chairman of the Dawes Committee, which tackled the problem of German reparations.^[3] He became vice president-elect when Coolidge was elected in 1924. So he was the nation's Veep when he received the Nobel Peace Prize -- the first and only vice president to have achieved that distinction.

Jimmy Carter won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 "for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development." He was the first U.S. president to accept the prize in person, in a ceremony in Oslo on December 10, 2002.^[4] His efforts at Camp David were instrumental in Anwar al-Sadat and Menachem Begin sharing the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978.

Barack Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize on October 9, 2009. Regarding Obama and the peace prize, consider this initial reaction from the *Washington Post* article:

"...the announcement astonished observers -- drawing gasps from the audience in Oslo -- in part because Obama assumed office less than two weeks before the Feb. 1 deadline for nominations..."

Obama is the third sitting U.S. president -- and the first in 90 years -- to win the coveted peace prize. His predecessors won during their second White House terms, however, and after significant diplomatic achievements. Woodrow Wilson was awarded the prize in 1919, after helping to found the League of Nations and shaping the Treaty of Versailles; and Theodore Roosevelt was the recipient in 1906 for his work to negotiate an end to the Russo-Japanese war.

"In contrast, Obama is struggling with two wars -- weighing whether to increase the number of U.S. troops fighting to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan and overseeing the withdrawal of American combat troops from Iraq. He is mired in domestic struggles over health care reform and economic recovery efforts, and searching for ways to build momentum to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and to assemble an international effort to stop Iran's nuclear program.

"In choosing Obama from among 205 nominees, the committee appeared to be continuing its rebuke of the Bush administration's go-it-alone approach to world bodies and alliances." ^[5]

Note that three of the four winners of the Nobel Peace Prize were sitting presidents. Presidents Roosevelt and Wilson won the prize during their second term in office, after considerable achievements on behalf of world peace, while President Obama won the prize during his rookie year in the White House on the prospects that his international priorities will lead to greater peace.

Conspicuously, Jimmy Carter won the peace prize not while he was a sitting president, but more than two decades later, during the George W. Bush administration. Many observers believe the timing was meant to convey a message about the Nobel Committee's attitude toward the 43rd president's foreign policy.

This last point underscores the fact that the Nobel Peace Prize committee is composed of five members selected by the Norwegian parliament, the *Storting*. Put another way, the Nobel Peace Prize reflects the consensus of Norwegian politics. ^[6]

In addition to these four presidents and a vice president, a handful of secretaries of state also won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Elihu Root won the Nobel Peace Prize for 1912. Root had served as Theodore Roosevelt's second secretary of state. Root agreed to speak in Oslo on September 8, 1914, but was prevented from doing so by the outbreak of World War I. This is what was said about Root in absentia: "In the ten years during which he held office [as secretary of war and secretary of state], he had to settle a number of particularly difficult problems, some of an international character. It was he who was chiefly responsible for organizing affairs in Cuba and in the Philippines after the Spanish-American War. Even more important was his work in bringing about better understanding between the countries of North and South America. When he visited South America in the summer of 1906, he did a great deal to strengthen the Pan-American movement, and in 1908 he founded the Pan-American Bureau in New York. His strenuous efforts to improve relations between the small Central American countries have borne splendid fruit. The most difficult problem with which Root had to deal while secretary of state, however, was the dispute with Japan over the status of Japanese immigrants. Although a final solution of this dispute eluded him, his work on it was nevertheless of great value. After he had left the government, Root gave himself heart and soul to the cause of peace, and he is now president of the great Carnegie Peace Foundation. [As a senator] Root was one of the most energetic champions of Taft's proposal for an unconditional arbitration treaty between the U.S.A. and Great Britain; and in the dispute concerning tolls for the Panama Canal, he supported the English interpretation of the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty, opposing special privileges for American shipping. When he spoke on this in the Senate last spring, he gained the admiration of all friends of peace."^[7]

Frank Kellogg won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1929. He served as Calvin Coolidge's second secretary of state, and Herbert Hoover's too. At the presentation ceremony it was said of him: "The movement in favor of the 'outlawry of war,' to proclaim war illegal and to label it a crime, had gained increasing support in the U.S.A. ever since the end of the World War. Mr. Briand, France's great champion of peace, made a point of choosing a memorable date in the American calendar -- April 6, 1927 -- the tenth anniversary of the entry of the United States into the war, to declare himself a disciple of that movement: 'If there were any need between these two great democracies [the United States and France] to testify more convincingly in favor of peace and to present to the peoples a more solemn example, France would be ready publicly to subscribe, with the United States, to any mutual engagement tending, as between those two countries, to "outlaw war," to use an American expression.' And on June 20, 1927, Briand handed to the American ambassador in Paris a draft of a treaty of perpetual friendship between the two countries. According to the draft, the two parties would solemnly declare that they condemned war and renounced it as an instrument of their national policies. On the other side of the Atlantic, Frank B. Kellogg, the U.S. Secretary of State, elevated this proposal to the status of the world pact to which we pay tribute today in the person of its author: 'The Government of the United States is prepared, therefore, to concert with the Government of France with a view to the conclusion of a treaty among the principal Powers of the world, open to signature by all nations, condemning war and renouncing it as an instrument of national policy in favor of the pacific settlement of international disputes.' And from this common action emerged the pact that today binds together almost all civilized nations in the world. Article I of the Pact states the following: 'The High Contracting Parties solemnly declare in the names of their respective peoples that they condemn recourse to war for the solution of international controversies and renounce it as an instrument of national policy in their relations with one another.'"^[8]

Cordell Hull won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1945 for a career devoted to peace. He was Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of state from 1933-1944, and his reward was sealed when FDR called him the "father of the United Nations."^[9]

George C. Marshall won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953. His packed resume included being general president of the American Red Cross, President Truman's third secretary of state, Truman's third secretary of defense, U.N. delegate, and originator of the Marshall Plan. At the award ceremony, it was said of Marshall: "Less than four months after entering the State Department, he presented his plan for that tremendous aid to Europe which has become inseparably connected with his name. He stated in his famous speech at Harvard University: 'Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos. Its purpose should be the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist. Such assistance, I am convinced, must not be on a piecemeal basis as various crises develop. Any assistance that this government may render in the future should provide a cure rather than a mere palliative.' Marshall carried out his plan, fighting for it for two years in public and in Congress."^[10]

Henry Kissinger won the Nobel Peace Prize, along with Le Duc Tho, in 1973. After negotiations that lasted nearly four years, a ceasefire agreement was concluded between the U.S. and the Vietnamese Democratic Republic on January 23, 1973. The new secretary of state was unable to attend the award ceremony.^[11]

(Question from Susan E. of Washington, DC)

[1] <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1906/roosevelt-acceptance.html>

[2] <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1919/wilson-acceptance.html>

[3] <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1925/dawes-acceptance.html>

[4] <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/2002/carter-lecture.html>

[5] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/09/AR2009100900914.html>

[6] <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NzU1ZDg4OGMzOGQ1MjkzZDMyYmRlMG10YjgyNmU1OWQ=>

[7] <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1912/press.html>

[8] <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1929/index.html>

[9] <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1945/press.html>

[10] <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1953/press.html>

[11] <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1973/press.html>